

ARTICLE APPEARED
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CHICAGO TRIBUNE
6 September 1982

Hepatitis, dysentery plague Soviet army, journal reports

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WASHINGTON — The unsanitary living conditions of the Red Army, including mess hall cooks who don't wash their hands, are triggering "epidemics" of dysentery and hepatitis among troops, Soviet medical journals say.

Rep. Les Aspin (D., Wis.), in releasing some details from translations of the Soviet Military Medical Journal last week, said: "Dirty-handed Soviet army cooks may be one of the U.S. Army's most effective weapons."

The journal's May issue warns commanders: "It is impermissible to allow dipping of hands in disinfectant solution as substitute for handwashing" before cooking and washing dishes.

Furthermore, the commanders were told that soldiers with "infections of the skin and subcutaneous cysts" may not serve as cooks or dishwashers.

Aspin said the translation he had read did not indicate how many Soviet troops suffer from filth-related illnesses, but he added: "One measure may be the report that among 85,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, there were 6,000 cases of hepatitis within 6 months after the invasion of December, 1979."

Aspin raised the issue of Soviet military health problems as part of a continuing analysis emphasizing faults and weaknesses in the Red Army. Aspin has long charged that Pentagon leaders over-emphasize the strengths of the Soviet military machine to press for unnecessarily high arms budgets.

Aspin also warned recently that "over-estimation of Soviet capabilities could make (the President) push the nuclear button in a crisis sooner than if he realized our conventional forces could take theirs."

Using the health report as an example, he said: "The articles' list of reasons for

hepatitis and dysentery epidemics show just how grim life in the Soviet army can be."

The articles cited these problems:

- Soviet soldiers are allowed only one bath a week.

- Pipes at one military installation were accidentally channeling sewer water into the drinking supply.

- Improper plumbing at an unnamed port filled shipboard water cisterns with polluted water intended for cooling engines.

- Ship captains in recent years have taken on disease-bearing water while in equatorial ports.

The journal advised military commanders that in the future, a single case of hepatitis "must be taken as the first sign of an epidemic."

Aspin said: "The proverbial 10-foot-tall Soviet soldier may be only 2 feet tall if he's doubled over with dysentery."

Other weaknesses that the American intelligence community has identified in the Soviet military include drug and alcohol abuse, theft of equipment by officers, racial dissension among the ranks of entire divisions, food shortages and difficulties in recruiting soldiers.

American debriefing officers who questioned several Soviet defectors provided the most recent indications of drug and alcohol abuse, Aspin said.

These sources disclosed that the Soviet army had issued a memo to all commanders warning that 26 members of one unit had died after drinking antifreeze.

The defectors told stories of troops drinking cologne, brake fluid, barracks-brewed "vodka" and other dangerous fluids.

Drug abuse is growing in Soviet units, largely because troops from the European region of the Soviet Union are being assigned to units with soldiers from the Moslem regions of Soviet Central Asia,

the defectors indicated.

One particularly disturbing new fad among these racially mixed units is making a highly concentrated syrup laden with caffeine from a tea called chefir and then mixing it with vodka and a type of hashish called anasha.

One defector reported: "Anasha plus chefir or plus wine or plus vodka made (the soldiers) feel very high. They got real crazy. They even began shooting sometimes. I remember, one of the minorities (a Moslem) started shooting out the windows at headquarters."

The CIA apparently found one officer who had been assigned to deal with alcoholism-related problems. The officer said that many in the Red Army believe alcohol doesn't affect combat readiness.

"They pointed out that in World War II the Soviet command used to issue soldiers four ounces of vodka before major battles, to make them less frightened," Aspin said.

"It's one thing for a World War II soldier armed with a rifle to go into battle drunk. It's another thing to try to fly a Soviet antitank guided missile to the target using a joystick when you've been drinking," the congressman added.

The racial and ethnic makeup of Red Army units causes problems other than producing exotic new ways of becoming high, according to Aspin's analysis of defectors' reports.

Russians clash with Tartars; Ukrainians with Kazakhs, and Latvians with Lithuanians over ethnic issues, the defectors said. Gun battles break out sporadically, according to the interviews.

During a recent Soviet exercise in Czechoslovakia, the ethnic feuding among troops caused officers to fear for their lives, according to one interview.

"When the soldiers were issued weapons during the first 10 days, the officers were terribly afraid of the soldiers," the defector said. "It was impossible to go near a soldier," he recalled.